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No. 47 Court Street, Boston.



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BOSTON.

BY
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NO. 47 COURT STREET, BOSTON.

THAT part of Court Street which lies between Washington Street and Scollay Square has undergone many changes of late years.

Within the memory of men now living, the entire street, within these limits, has been rebuilt, in some instances more than once, every building, with but a single exception, having been torn down to give place to a modern structure. In many cases, the modern edifice itself has been superseded by one still more modern, until a man not much beyond middle age looks in vain for any reminder of the Court Street of his boyhood.

This solitary exception, the only relic of the past, is No. 47, which still stands on the North side of the street directly opposite the Westerly arm of Court Square and nearly opposite the Old Court House.

The two contiguous brick buildings, four stories in height, now numbered 45, 47, 49 and 51 Court Street, are part of what was once the Jackson estate. Numbers 45 and 51 on the street floor are occupied by a well-known restaurant. Between them there is a doorway, one side of which is numbered 47 and the other 49. From this a stairway ascends to the offices in the stories above, these buildings having now a common entrance which, however, is entirely on the land belonging to No. 47.

The Jackson estate was conveyed to William Hall Jackson, merchant, by James Bowdoin, Esq., by deed dated April 20, 1803, recorded with Suffolk Deeds, Lib. 205, folio 79. In a mortgage made by Jackson two years afterward he describes the land as then occupied by "my new and old dwelling houses."* The old dwelling-house was of wood, and was on the land when he bought it. The new dwelling-house was of brick, and is the present No. 47, which Jackson seems to have built shortly after his purchase. It is, therefore, nearly one hundred years old. The old wooden dwelling-house did not give place to the present brick building, No. 49, until many years later.

* Suffolk Deeds, Lib. 214, fol. 150.

When Court Street, no longer desirable for residences, entered upon the transition period through which all our city streets seem doomed sooner or later to pass, not a few of its old dwelling-houses became boarding-houses. This fate overtook No. 47 as early at least as 1816, while it was in the ownership of Daniel and Charles Jackson of Plymouth, the nephews of William Hall Jackson, who died in 1809. Mary Keith, Eveline Higby and Esther Lovell, worthy and respectable widows, were among those who, in succession, kept boarders at No. 47, from this time down to the year 1833.

But at length the boarding-houses were compelled to give way before the encroachments of business, and in the early thirties various trades and callings were installed in No. 47. It was while it was so tenanted, that a disastrous fire*, which extended to the buildings on each side, broke out Sept. 24, 1835, in the "old wooden dwelling house" which William Hall Jackson bought of James Bowdoin. The second and third stories of No. 47 were then occupied by the Boston Bewick Company of engravers, and there the loss was considerable, not only the plates but many private memoranda, the collection of years, being destroyed. Abel Bowen†, engraver, lost his valuable private library and other property, all uninsured. In the upper or attic story, where Charles Eastham had a book bindery, many books in process of binding were consumed. All these stories were badly damaged. But the stock of Robert E. Newman, dealer in crockery ware, on the lower floor, was but little injured. This fire, however, was not without its compensation, for the old wooden dwelling-house was so nearly destroyed that it was replaced by the present brick building No. 49, which was completed and ready for occupancy the following year.

After some fifteen years of this tenure, these various trades and occupations gave place in their turn to the lawyers, and these two buildings were then fitted up for law offices, the ground floor being occupied by shops. Unlike No. 4 Court Street, No 47 has never had a poet to perpetuate its memory in imperishable verse, but many well-known lawyers had offices there, and in its Siamese-twin brother, No. 49. Most of them have long ago been called to plead their own causes before the tribunal of Rhadamanthus.

In 1848, Abraham Jackson, then a young lawyer, a grandson of Daniel Jackson, was engaged in the practice of the law at No. 47. His office was up one flight, in what had been the parlor of William Hall Jackson's "new brick house." Here he continued for more than a quarter of a century, one of the most honored and respected

* Boston Daily Advertiser of Sept. 25, 1835. Columbian Centinel of Sept. 26, 1835.

† Collections of the Bostonian Society, I. 27. Abel Bowen, by William H. Whitmore, Boston, 1887.

members of the Suffolk bar, until his sad downfall less than thirty years ago. John F. Colby, Jonathan Wales and John T. Hassam were the next occupants of this office. On the death of John F. Colby, his son John H. Colby, associating himself with Edwin A. Bayley, succeeded to his law business. On the removal of Colby & Bayley, James W. Grimes established himself there and later Herbert S. Riley.

Among the many lawyers who had offices in No. 47 or No. 49, more than twenty years ago, are the following: Joseph Cutler, Jonathan White, William Bates, Samuel B. Walcott, Charles F. Simmons, Francis W. Vaughan, Josiah Porter, Samuel S. Shaw, Samuel Tompson, Charles W. Tuttle, Augustus O. Brewster, Daniel S. Gilchrist, Alexander Young, Chauncey P. Judd, John P. Treadwell, Solon Baneroff, James F. Farley, George Morrill, Benjamin F. Hayes, George H. Poor, Frederick W. Choate, George C. Travis, Lendall Pitts Cazeaux, George Wheaton Deans, Samuel J. Elder, John H. Hardy, George A. Bruce and Joseph Bennett. But of all the lawyers who were there a quarter of a century ago, only two, James F. Farley of No. 49 and John T. Hassam of No. 47, are now to be found there.

Dr. Charles T. Jackson, chemist, mineralogist and geologist, one of the parties to the controversy over the discovery of the use of ether as an anæsthetic, "the greatest boon to the human race since the invention of printing," had, during the last few years of his life, a room in No. 49, which he used as an office or laboratory. The medals and decorations received by him from various foreign governments, in recognition of his scientific discoveries, were deposited by his widow with the Massachusetts Historical Society. He was a cousin of the father of Abraham Jackson and like him was one of the owners of these two buildings. John Goddard Jackson, a brother of Abraham Jackson, had for many years a law office at No. 47 and afterward at No. 49.

These buildings had formerly, on the street floor, separate entrances from which staircases led to the floors above, but one of these entrances was afterward closed, the westerly side wall of No. 47 was pierced at one point on the first story above the street and a common entrance made, by which access was had to the upper stories of both buildings. The outer door bore at one time only the number 47, so that all the occupants of these stories appear in the directories as of No. 47.

Both buildings were originally three stories in height, with a pitched roof, but in later years another story was added to each, by carrying up the walls so as to include the former attics.

There was a partition of this estate among the Jackson heirs in 1874. Although the record title to No. 47, near the close of Abra-

ham Jackson's career, stood in the name of another, it was not until 1875 that the estate was finally lost to the Jacksons. No. 49 was held by the Jackson heirs until 1880, when they conveyed by deed what had so long been their ancestral estate.

No. 47, however, has not always had its present number.

In the early period of our history, the houses in Boston were not numbered, but as the town increased in size, gradually, little by little, particularly toward the close of the eighteenth century, the custom of designating them by numbers began to prevail. This was not, however, upon any fixed plan, or with any system, nor was it done by the town authorities. It was left to the discretion or caprice of the individual householders. Some streets were in part numbered, and in part unnumbered, others not at all. The result was intolerable confusion.

The advertisement to the "Boston Directory" of 1810 says: "It becomes continually more necessary that the buildings in each street should be numbered; the convenience resulting from it would be great, and the expense small. If one or more intelligent persons in each street would undertake the business, it might very soon be accomplished, and the public essentially benefited."

In the advertisement to the Directory of 1821, reference is again made to the difficulty of describing persons who live on streets where the houses are not numbered. "For a trifling individual expense, numbers might be attached to every building. . . . Some of our principal streets are but partially numbered, and those very irregularly. This inconvenience might be easily remedied by the exertions of two or more active individuals in each street."

These appeals, it will be observed, are for action on the part of "intelligent" and "active" individuals, and not the town authorities, to whom these adjectives do not seem to have been at all applicable.

Boston became a city in 1822, and one of the first matters which claimed the attention of the new government was that of numbering the buildings. An order was passed, Jan. 1, 1824, for the appointment of a committee "to inquire into the expediency of authorizing the Mayor and Aldermen to regulate, and affix suitable numbers on the dwelling-houses and stores in any street within the City with liberty to report by ordinance or otherwise."* This committee reported an ordinance which was non-concurred in. "The Board of Aldermen [March 25, 1824] being informed that some person has been going through the City affixing numbers to houses & stores, and as it is said suggesting that he has had for that purpose the authority of this board; thereupon, Ordered, that notice be given to the public, that except in the case of State street no such authority

* City of Boston Records, II. 11, 45.

has been ever given; and that such proceeding has been wholly without their sanction."* Finally, June 28, 1824, "An ordinance authorizing the numbering of buildings, within the City of Boston" was passed.† So that it was not until the lapse of nearly two hundred years from the first settlement of the town that there was any official and systematic numbering of its buildings.

Even then the reform made but slow progress, for the advertisement to the Directory of 1836 contains the following appeal: "The irregularity in the numbering of many of the streets in this city, and others not being numbered at all, having given rise to much complaint, the publisher of the Boston Directory respectfully suggests, that if one or two intelligent persons in each unnumbered street would interest themselves in the subject, and apply to the Mayor and Aldermen, the defect might be easily remedied, and the public convenience essentially promoted—the City authorities being always ready to number streets, when application is properly made to them."

It was not until 1828 that the renumbering in Court Street was made, No. 47 in that year receiving its present number. It had formerly been known as No. 86.

* City of Boston Records, II. 89.

† *Ibid.*, II. 241. See also *Ibid.*, IV. 138-140.

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